

The Last of the Season

They said on TV that her name was Molly, but Jim already knew that. They also said that she was eight years old, but she didn't look eight, more like six; didn't look old enough to be in school, even. She didn't look anything like the picture they'd put up on the screen, either. The picture was at least a year old, and done by some cut-rate outfit for her school. Her hair was shorter, her face rounder, her expression so stiff she looked like a kid-dummy. There was nothing like the lively spark in her eyes, or the naughty smile she'd worn this afternoon. The kid in the picture was so clean she squeaked; where was the sticky popsicle residue on her face and hands, the dirt-smudges on her knees?

Jim lost interest as soon as the station cut away to the national news, and turned the set off.

The remote-controlled TV was the one luxury in his beige box of an apartment. His carpet was the cheapest possible brown industrial crap, the curtains on the picture-window a drab, stiff, cheap polyester stuff, backed with even cheaper vinyl that was seamed with cracks after less than a year. He had one chair (Salvation Army, brown corduroy), one lamp (imitation brass, from K-mart), one vinyl sofa (bright orange, St. Vincent de Paul) that was hard and uncomfortable, and one coffee-table (imitation Spanish, Goodwill) where the fancy color TV sat, like a king on a peasant's crude bench.

In the bedroom, just beyond the closed door, was his bedroom, no better furnished than the living-room. He stored his clothing in odd chests of folded cardboard, with a clamp-lamp attached to the cardboard table by the king-sized bed. Like the TV, the bed was top-of-the-line, with a satin bedspread. On that bed, sprawled over the royal blue satin, was Molly.

Jim rose, slowly and silently, and tiptoed across the carpet to the bedroom door, cracking it open just an inch or so, peering inside. She looked like a Norman Rockwell picture, lying on her side, so pale against the dark, vivid fabric, her red corduroy jumper rumpled across her stomach where she clutched her teddy bear with one arm. She was still out of it, sleeping off the little knock on the skull he'd given her. Either that, or she was still under the whiff of ether that had followed. When he was close to her, he could still smell the banana-scent of her popsicle, and see a sticky trace of syrup around her lips. The light from the door caught in the eyes of her teddy bear, and made them shine with a feral, red gleam.

She'd been easy, easy-so trusting, especially after all the contact he'd had with her for the past three weeks. He'd had his eye on two or three of the kids at Kennedy Grade School, but she'd been the one he'd really wanted; like the big TV, she was top-of-the-line, and any of the others would have been a disappointment. She was perfect, prime material, best of the season. Those big, chocolate-brown eyes, the golden-brown hair cut in a sweet page-boy, the round dolly-face—she couldn't have been any better.

He savored the moment, watching her at a distance, greedily studying her at his leisure, knowing that he had her all to himself and no one could interfere.

She'd been one of the last kids to leave the school on this warm, golden afternoon—the rest had scattered on down the streets, chasing the fallen leaves by the time she came out. He'd been loitering, waiting to see if he'd missed her, if someone had picked her up after school, or if she'd had a dentist appointment or something—but no one would ever give a second look at the ice-cream man loitering outside a grade school. He looked like what

everybody expected, a man obviously trying to squeeze every last dime out of the rug-rats that he could.

The pattern while he'd had this area staked out was that Molly only had ice-cream money about a third of the time. He'd set her up so carefully—if she came out of the school alone, and started to pass the truck with a wistful look in her eyes, he'd made a big production out of looking around for other kids, then signalling her to come over. The first couple of times, she'd shaken her head and run off, but after she'd bought cones from him a time or two, he wasn't a stranger, and to her mind, was no longer in the category of people she shouldn't talk to. Then she responded, and he had given her a broken popsicle in her favorite flavor of banana. "Do me a favor and eat this, all right?" he'd said, in his kindest voice. "I can't sell a broken popsicle, and I'd hate for it to go to waste." Then he'd lowered his voice to a whisper and bent over her. "But don't tell the other kids, okay? Let's just keep it a secret."

She nodded, gleefully, and ran off. After that he had no trouble getting her to come over to the truck; after all, why should she be afraid of the friend who gave her ice cream for free, and only asked that she keep it a secret?

Today she'd had money, though, and from the sly gleam in her eyes he would bet she'd filched it from her momma's purse this morning. He'd laid out choices for her like a servant laying out feast-choices for a princess, and she'd sparkled at him, loving the attention as much as the treat.

She'd dawdled over her choice, her teddy bear clutched under one arm, a toy so much a part of her that it could have been another limb. That indecision bought time for the other kids to clear out of the way, and all the teachers to get to their cars and putt out of the parking-lot. His play-acting paid off handsomely, especially after he'd nodded at the truck and winked. She'd wolfed down her cone, and he gave her another broken popsicle; she lingered on, sucking on the yellow ice in a way that made his groin tighten with anticipation. He'd asked her ingenuous questions about her school and her teacher, and she chattered amiably with him between slurps.

Then she'd turned to go at the perfect moment, with not a child, a car, or a teacher in sight. He reached for the sock full of sand inside the freezer-door, and in one, smooth move, gave her a little tap in just the right place.

He caught her before she hit the ground. Then it was into the special side of the ice-cream truck with her; the side not hooked up to the freezer-unit, with ventilation holes bored through the walls in places where no one would find them. He gave her a whiff of ether on a rag, just in case, to make sure she stayed under, then he slid her limp body into the cardboard carton he kept on that side, just in case somebody wanted to look inside. He closed and latched the door, and was back in the driver's seat before two minutes were up, with still no sign of man nor beast. Luck, luck, all the way.

Luck, or pure genius. He couldn't lose; he was invulnerable.

Funny how she'd kept a grip on that toy, though. But that was luck, too; if she'd left it there—

Well, he might have forgotten she'd had it. Then somebody would have found it, and someone might have remembered her standing at the ice-cream truck with it beside her.

But it had all gone smoothly, perfectly planned, perfectly executed, ending

with a drive through the warm September afternoon, bells tinkling slightly out-of-tune, no different from any other ice-cream man out for the last scores of the season. He'd felt supremely calm and in control of everything the moment he was in his seat; no one would ever suspect him, he'd been a fixture since the beginning of school. Who ever sees the ice-cream man? He was as much a part of the landscape as the fire-hydrant he generally stopped beside.

They'd ask the kids of course, now that Molly was officially missing--and they'd say the same stupid thing they always did. "Did you see any strangers?" they'd ask. "Any strange cars hanging around? Anyone you didn't recognize?"

Stupid; they were just stupid. He was the smart one. The kids would answer just like they always did, they'd say no, they hadn't seen any strangers.

No, he wasn't a stranger, he was the ice-cream man. The kids saw him today, and they'd see him tomorrow, he'd make sure of that. He'd be on his route for the next week at least, unless there was a cold snap. He knew how cops thought, and if he disappeared, they might look for him. No way was he going to break his pattern. Eventually the cops would question him--not tomorrow, but probably the day after that. He'd tell them he had seen the little girl, that she'd bought a cone from him. He'd cover his tracks there, since the other kids would probably remember that she'd been at the truck. But he'd shrug helplessly, and say that she hadn't been on the street when he drove off. He'd keep strictly to the truth, just not all the truth.

Now Molly was all his, and no one would take her away from him until he was done with her.

He drove home, stopping to sell cones when kids flagged him down, taking his time. It wouldn't do to break his pattern. He took out the box that held Molly and brought it upstairs, then made two more trips, for the leftover frozen treats, all in boxes just like the one that held Molly. The neighbors were used to this; it was another part of his routine. He was the invisible man; old Jim always brings in the leftovers and puts 'em in his freezer overnight, it's cheaper than running the truck-freezer overnight.

He knew what they said about him. That Jim was a good guy--kept to himself mostly, but when it was really hot or he had too much left over to fit in his freezer, he'd pass out freebies. A free ice-cream bar was appreciated in this neighborhood, where there wasn't a lot of money to spare for treats. Yeah, Jim was real quiet, but okay, never gave any trouble to anybody.

If the cops went so far as to look into his background, they wouldn't find anything. He ran a freelance ice-cream route in the summer and took odd jobs in the winter; there was no record of his ever getting into trouble.

Of course there was no record. He was smart. Nobody had ever caught him, not when he set fires as a kid, not when he prowled the back alleys looking for stray dogs and cats, and not later, when he went on to the targets he really wanted. He was careful. When he first started on kids, he picked the ones nobody would miss. And he kept up with the literature; he knew everything the cops would look for.

Jim's apartment was a corner-unit, under the roof. There was nobody above him, the old man under him was stone-deaf, the guy on one side was a stoner on the night-shift, and the couple on the other side kept their music blasting so loud it was a wonder that they weren't deaf. Nobody would ever hear a thing.

Meanwhile, Jim waited, as darkness fell outside, for Molly to sleep off her ether and her bump; it wasn't any fun for him when his trophies were out of

it. Jim liked them awake; he liked to see their eyes when they realized that no one was coming to rescue them.

He changed into a pair of old jeans and a tee-shirt in the living-room, hanging his white uniform in the closet, then looked in on her again.

She still had a hold on that teddy bear. It was a really unusual toy; it was one of the many things that had marked her when he'd first looked for targets. Jim was really glad she'd kept such a tight grip on it; it was so different that there was little doubt it would have been spotted as hers if she'd dropped it. The plush was a thick, black fur, extremely realistic; in fact, he wasn't entirely certain that it was fake fur. There was no sign of the wear that kids usually put on that kind of beloved plaything. The mouth was half-open, lined with red felt, with white felt teeth and a red felt tongue. Instead of a ribbon bow, this bear had a real leather collar with an odd tag hanging from it; pottery or glass, maybe, or enameled metal, it certainly wasn't plastic. There was a faint, raised pattern on the back, and the word "Tedi" on the front in a childish printed scrawl. The eyes were oddest of all--whoever had made this toy must have used the same eyes that taxidermists used; they looked real, alive.

It was going to prove a little bit of problem dealing with that bear, after. He was so careful not to leave any fiber or hair evidence; he always washed them when he was through with them, dressing them in fancy party clothing he took straight out of the packages, then wrapping them in plastic once they were dressed, to keep from contaminating them. Once he was through with her and dressed her in that frilly blue party-dress he'd bought, he'd cut up her old clothing into tiny pieces and flush them down the john, a few at a time, to keep from clogging the line. That could be fatal.

He'd do the part with the knife in the bathtub, of course, so there wouldn't be any bloodstains. He knew exactly how to get blood-evidence scrubbed out of the bathroom, what chemicals to use and everything. They'd have to swab out the pipes to find anything.

But the bear was a problem. He'd have to figure out a smart way to get rid of it, because it was bound to collect all kinds of evidence.

Maybe give it to a kid? Maybe not; there was a chance the kid would remember him. By now it had probably collected fibers. . . .

He had it; the Salvation Army box, the one on Colby, all the way across town. They'd let that thing get stuffed full before they ever emptied it, and by then the bear would have collected so much fiber and hair they'd never get it all sorted out. Then he could take her to MacArthur Park; it was far enough away from the collection box. He'd leave her there like he always did, propped up on a bench like an oversized doll, a bench off in an out-of-the-way spot. He'd used MacArthur Park before, but not recently, and at this time of year it might be days before anyone found her.

But the bear--better get it away from her now, before it collected something more than hair. For one thing, it would be harder to handle her if she kept clinging to it. Something about those eyes bothered him, too, and he wasn't in a mood to be bothered.

He cracked the door open, slipped inside, pried the bear out of her loose grip. He threw it into the bathroom, but Molly didn't stir; he was vaguely disappointed. He'd hoped she show some sign of coming around when he took the toy.

Well, he had all night, all weekend, as long as she lasted. He'd have to make the most of this one; she was the last of the season.

Might as well get the stuff out.

He went into the kitchenette and dragged out the plastic step-stool. Standing it in the closet in the living-room, he opened up the hatch into the crawl-space. It wasn't tall enough for him to see what was up there, but what he wanted was right by the hatch anyway. He felt across the fiberglass battings; the paper over the insulation crackled under his fingers. He groped until his hand encountered the cardboard box he'd stored up there. Getting both hands around it, straining on tiptoe to do so, he lowered it carefully down through the hatch. He had to bring it through the opening catty-cornered to make it fit. It wasn't heavy, but it was an awkward shape.

He carried it to the center of the living-room and placed it on the carpet, kneeling beside it with his stomach tight with anticipation. Slowly, with movements ritualized over time, he undid the twine holding it closed, just so. He coiled up the twine and laid it to the side, exactly five inches from the side of the box. He reached for the lid.

But as he started to open it, he thought he heard a faint sound, as if something moved in the bedroom. Was Molly finally awake?

He got to his feet, and moved softly to the door. But when he applied his eye to the crack, he was disappointed to see that she hadn't moved at all. She lay exactly as he'd left her, head pillowed on one arm, hair scattered across his pillow, lips pursed, breathing softly but regularly. Her red corduroy jumper was still in the same folds it had been when he'd put her down on the bed, rucked up over her hip so that her little pink panties showed the tiniest bit.

Then he saw the bear.

It was back right where it had been before, sitting up in the curve of her stomach. Looking at him.

He shook his head, frowning. Of course it wasn't looking at him, it was his imagination; it was just a toy. He must have been so wrapped up in anticipation that he'd flaked—and hadn't thrown it in the bathroom as he'd intended, or else he'd absent-mindedly put it back on the bed.

Easily fixed. He took the few steps into the room, grabbed the bear by one ear, and threw it into the bedroom closet, closing the door on it. Molly didn't stir, and he retired to the living room and his treasure chest.

On the top layer of the box lay a tangle of leather and rubber. He sorted out the straps carefully, laying out all the restraints in their proper order, with the rubber ball for her mouth and the gag to hold it in there first in line. That was one of the most important parts. Whatever sound got past the gag wouldn't get past the neighbors' various deficiencies.

Something was definitely moving in the next room. He heard the closet door opening, then the sounds of shuffling.

He sprinted to the door—

Only to see that Molly was lying in exactly the same position, and the bear was with her.

He shook his head. Damn! He couldn't be going crazy—

Then he chuckled at a sudden memory. The third kid he'd done had pulled something like this—the kid was a sleepwalker, with a knack for lying back down in precisely the same position as before, and it wasn't until he'd stayed in the bedroom instead of going through his collection that he'd proved it to himself. Molly had obviously missed her bear, gotten up, searched blindly for her toy, found it, then lay back down again. Yeah, come to think of it, her jumper was a bit higher on her hip, and she was more on her back than her side, now.

But that bear had to go.

He marched in, grabbed the bear again, and looked around. Now where?

The bathroom, the cabinet under the sink. There was nothing in there but a pair of dead roaches, and it had a child-proof latch on it.

The eyes flashed at him as he flipped on the bathroom light and whipped the cabinet open. For one moment he almost thought the eyes glared at him with a red light of their own before he closed the door on the thing and turned the lock with a satisfying click.

Back to the box.

The next layer was his pictures. They weren't of any of his kids; he wasn't that stupid. Nothing in this box would ever connect him with the guy they were calling the "Sunday-school killer" because he left them dressed in Sunday best, clean and shining, in places like parks and beaches, looking as if they'd just come from church.

But the pictures were the best the Internet had to offer, and a lot of these kids looked like the ones he'd had. Pretty kids, real pretty.

He took them out in the proper order, starting with the simple ones, letting the excitement build in his groin as he savored each one. First, the nudes—ten of them, he knew them all by heart. Then the nudes with the kids "playing" together, culled from the "My Little Fishie" newsletter of a nut-case religious cult that believed in kid-sex.

Then the good ones.

Halfway through, he slipped his hand into his pants without taking his eyes off the pictures.

This was going to be a good one. Molly looked just like the kid in the best of his pictures. She was going to be perfect; the last of the season, the best of the season.

He was pretty well occuppied as he got to the last set, though he noted absently that it sounded as if Molly was up and moving around again. This was the bondage-and-snuff set, very hard to get, and the only reason he had them at all was because he'd stolen them from a storage-locker. He wouldn't have taken the risk of getting them personally, but they'd given him some of his best ideas.

Molly must be awake by now. But this wasn't to be hurried—there wouldn't be any Mollys or Jeffreys until next year, next spring, summer, and fall. He had to make this one last.

He savored the emotions in the pictured eyes as he would savor Molly's fear;

savored their pleading expressions, their helplessness. Such pretty little things, like her, like all his kids.

They wanted it, anybody knew that. Freud said so—that had been in that psychology course he took by correspondence when he was trying to figure himself out. Look at the way kids played "doctor" the minute you turned your back on them. That religious cult had it right; kids wanted it, needed it, and the only thing getting in the way was the way a bunch of repressed old men felt about it.

He'd show her what it was she wanted, show her good. He'd make it last, take it slow. Then, once she was all his and would do anything he said, he'd make sure nobody else would ever have her again. He'd keep her his, forever. Not even her parents would have her the way he did.

Under the last layer of pictures was the knife, the beautiful, shining filleting knife, the best made. Absolutely stainless, rustproof, with a pristine black handle. He laid it reverently beside the leather straps, then zipped up his pants and rose to his feet.

No doubt, she was shuffling around on the other side of the door, moving uncertainly back and forth. She should be just dazed enough that he'd get her gagged before she knew enough to scream.

He paused a moment to order his thoughts and his face before putting his hand on the doorknob. Next to the moment when the kid lay trussed-up under him, this was the best moment.

He flung the door wide open. "Hel-lo, Mo—"

That was as far as he got.

* * *

The screams brought the neighbors to break down the door. There were two sets of screams; his, and those of a terrified little girl pounding on the closet door.

A dozen of them gathered in the hall before they got up the courage to break in, and by then Jim wasn't screaming anymore. What they found in the living-room made the first inside run back out the way they had come.

One managed to get as far as the bedroom to release the child, a pale young woman who lived at the other end of the floor, whose maternal instincts over-rode her stomach long enough to rescue the weeping child.

Molly fell out of the closet into her arms, sobbing with terror. The young woman recognized her from news; how could she not? Her picture had been everywhere.

Meanwhile one of the others who had fled the whimpering thing on the living-room floor got to a phone and called the cops.

The young woman closed the bedroom door on the horror in the next room, took the hysterical, shivering child into her arms, and waited for help to arrive, absently wondering at her own, hitherto unsuspected courage.

While they were waiting, the thing on the floor mewled, gasped, and died.

Although the young woman hadn't known what to make of the tangle of leather she'd briefly glimpsed on the carpet, the homicide detective knew exactly what

it meant. He owed a candle to Saint Jude for the solving of his most hopeless case and another to the Virgin for saving this child before anything had happened to her.

And a third to whatever saint had seen to it that there would be no need for a trial.

"You say there was no sign of anything or anyone else?" he asked the young woman. She'd already told him that she was a librarian—that was shortly after she'd taken advantage of their arrival to close herself into the bathroom and throw up. He almost took her to task for possibly destroying evidence, but what was the point? This was one murder he didn't really want to solve.

She was sitting in the only chair in the living-room, carefully not looking at the outline on the carpet, or the blood-spattered mess of pictures and leather straps a little distance from her feet. He'd asked the same question at least a dozen times already.

"Nothing, no one." She shook her head. "There's no back door, just the hatches to the crawl-space, in each closet."

He looked where she pointed, at the open closet door with the kitchen stool still inside it. He walked over to the closet and craned his head around sideways, peering upward.

"Not too big, but a skinny guy could get up there," he said, half to himself. "Is that attic divided at all?"

"No, it runs all along the top floor; I never put anything up there because anybody could get into it from any other apartment." She shivered. "And I put locks on all my hatches. Now I'm glad I did. Once a year they fumigate, so they need the hatches to get exhaust fans up there."

"A skinny guy, one real good with a knife—maybe a 'Nam Vet. A SEAL, a Green Beret—" he was talking mostly to himself. "It might not have been a knife; maybe claws, like in the karate rags. Ninja claws. That could be what he used—"

He paced back to the center of the living room. The librarian rubbed her hands along her arms, watching him out of sick blue eyes.

"Okay, he knows what this sicko is up to—maybe he just now found out, doesn't want to call the cops for whatever reason. He comes down into the bedroom, locks the kid in the closet to keep her safe—"

"She told me that a bear locked her into the closet," the woman interrupted.

The detective laughed. "Lady, that kid has a knot the size of a baseball on her skull; she could have seen Luke Skywalker lock her in that closet!" He went back to his deductions. "Okay, he locks the kid in, then makes enough noise so joy-boy thinks she finally woke up. Then when the door opens—yeah. It'll fly." He nodded. "Then he gets back out by this hatch." He sighed, regretful that he wouldn't ever get a chance to thank this guy. "Won't be any fingerprints; guy like this would be too smart to leave any."

He stared at the outline on the blood-soaked carpet pensively. The librarian shuddered.

"Look, officer," she said, asserting herself, "If you don't need me anymore—"

"Hey, Pete—" the detective's partner poked his head in through the door. "The kid's parents are here. The kid wants her teddy—she's raising a real howl about it, and the docs at the hospital don't want to sedate her if they don't have to."

"Shit, the kid misses being a statistic by a couple of minutes, and all she can think about is her toy!" He shook his head, and refocused on the librarian. "Go ahead, miss. I don't think you can tell us anything more. You might want to check into the hospital yourself, get checked over for shock. Either that, or pour yourself a stiff one. Call in sick tomorrow."

He smiled, suddenly realizing that she was pretty, in a wilted sort of way—and after what she'd just been through, no wonder she was wilted.

"That was what I had in mind already, Detective," she replied, and made good her escape before he changed his mind.

"Pete, her folks say she won't be able to sleep without it," his partner persisted.

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead and take it," he responded absently. If things had gone differently—they'd be shaking out that toy for hair and fiber samples, if they found it at all.

He handed the bear to his partner.

"Oh—before you give it back—"

"What?"

"There's blood on the paws," he replied, already looking for trace evidence that would support his theories. "Wouldn't want to shake her up any further, so make sure you wash it off first."